DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 098 619 CS 201 718

AUTHOR Drew, Dan G.
TITLE Reporters' Attitudes, Expected Meetings with a Source and Journalistic Objectivity.
PUB DATE Aug 74
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism (57th, San Diego, August 18-21, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.85 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Attitudes; Communication (Thought Transfer); *Journalism; *Media Research; News Media; *News Reporting; *Press Opinion

ABSTRACT

A cornerstone of twentieth century journalism is the concept of objectivity. This experimental study explores psychological pressures on the reporter in a theoretical framework of balance theory and social perception. Specifically, it deals with reporters' attitudes toward their sources, their expectation of a future meeting with the sources, and the type of stories they write. It also seeks to determine whether perceptual screening, resulting from the journalist's attitude toward the source, is a factor in reportorial performance. Objectivity for this study is defined as fairness or balance in decision making, information seeking, and presentation of information. The most important finding of this study is the evidence that attitudes of reporters toward the source seemed to have little impact on news stories or editorials. The data also provide evidence indicating that selective perception is not a particularly strong restraint on reportorial activity. (TO)

ED 098619

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Reporters' Attitudes, Expected Meetings with a Source and Journalistic Objectivity

by

Dan G. Drew
Stanford University

CS 201 718

A cornerstone of 20th century journalism is the concept of objectivity. In a widely-used reporting text, Charnley says "Objectivity in news is one of the most important principles of modern journalism. Objectivity means that the news comes to the consumer untainted by any personal bias or outside influence that makes it appear anything but what it is."[1]

Behavioral research suggests, however, that objectivity is extremely difficult to achieve. The reporter makes many decisions during his working day, including what events to observe, how to observe them, and how to present these observations to his audience. At each decision point, psychological pressures may erode objectivity.

This experimental study explores psychological pressures on the reporter in a theoretical framework of balance theory and social perception. Specifically, it deals with the reporter's attitude toward his source, his expectation of a future meeting with the source, and the type of story he writes. It also seeks to determine whether perceptual screening, resulting from the journalist's attitude toward his source, is a factor in reportorial performance.

Objectivity for this study is defined as fairness or balance in decision making, information seeking, and presentation of information. The objective reporter should present a quantitatively balanced story containing both negative and positive information about the source.[2]

Theory and Related Studies

Heider's balance theory provides rationale for predicting that a reporter's attitudes affect his journalistic activities. According to Heider, the relationships among three elements in a perceiver's world, the perceiver (P), another person (O), and an object (X), may be either balanced or unbalanced. Relationships are either sentiment (liking or disliking) or unit (belonging together). If the relationships among P,O, and X are all positive or one is positive and two are negative, they are balanced. Any other combination of positive and negative signs is unbalanced. The theory postulates that an unbalanced state produces psychological pressure that is relieved only when balance is achieved.[3]

In a journalistic setting, if the reporter is labeled P, the source O, and the news story X, the theory predicts the reporter's attitude toward a source should influence his writing. A unit relationship seems to exist between the reporter and his story. Thus, if he dislikes the source, the bond between the story and the source should be negative in order for the triad to be balanced. If the journalist likes the source, then the bond between the story and the source should be positive in order to maintain a balanced state.

Although they did not deal with balance theory, Kerrick, Anderson, and Swales studied attitudes and news writing. They tested 17 subjects for attitudes toward unions

and management, then gave each three fact sheets: one biased toward the union, a second biased toward management, and a third in which the facts were not slanted. Student reporters were instructed to write three stories, one from each sheet.[4]

Those who wrote from a balanced fact sheet produced stories slightly biased in line with their attitudes, but the data were not significant statistically. In fact, the only group that produced biased stories reaching statistical significance was the one using fact sheets biased in favor of the reporters' attitudes. Contrary to what one might expect, they wrote stories slanted toward the side that did not correspond with their own attitudes.[5]

This study left the issue unresolved, however, because the authors used a rather insensitive measure of bias: the percentage of favorable or unfavorable statements used by reporters.

Greenburg and Tannenbaum also studied the effect of a newswriter's attitude on news stories. They provided three groups of students with different types of information from which to write. One group received statements attacking journalism students for a lack of ability and motivation, while a second group was given quctes praising journalism students for possessing these attributes. A third group received neutral statements. Those working from uncomplimentary statements wrote stories favcring journalism students.[6]

Comparing the two studies, there is more reason for expecting attitudes to affect stories in the Greenburg and

Tannenbaum study because the information given newswriters directly attacked them. This was not the case in the Anderson, Kerrick, and Swales experiment.

Expectation of Future Interaction

Besides making predictions about the effects of reporters' attitudes on their work, Heider's balance theory predicts that journalists should be predisposed to like sources whom they have to meet face to face in the future. The theory states that sentiment relationships should be harmonious with unit relationships.[7] In other words, if the reporter expects to meet a source, a unit relationship exists between them. Thus, the journalist should have a more favorable attitude toward the source if he expects to meet him in the future than if he does not expect to meet him. Applying the logic used above, reporters who expect to meet the source should be motivated to write more favorable stories than those who do not expect to meet him.

Darley and Berscheid tested this hypothesis in a nonjournalistic setting. College women who were given information about two persons, one of whom they expected to meet, were asked to rate the persons for likeability. Subjects liked persons they expected to meet better than those they did not expect to meet.[8]

Perception of the Source

The biasing mechanism through which a reporter's attitude toward a news source might affect objectivity is a matter of concern. On the basis of Bruner's writings, it can be argued that a screening process is involved in which the reporter's attitude influences the amount of favorable and unfavorable information he perceives about a person or issue.

A basic principle of perception is the idea that an individual is bombarded with more stimuli than he possibly can attend to at a certain point in time. Thus, he focuses on certain parts of the environment and ignores others.

Bruner deals with this selectivity in a decision making framework. He says that an individual places incoming information about an object, or person, into categories developed primarily from past experience. Once the decision is made to categorize an object, a great amount of incoming information about it is screened. The perceiver also makes predictions about the future behavior of the object on the basis of his categorization.[9]

For example, the reporter might use information he receives to categorize a news source as likeable. Once this is done, the reporter might expect to learn only positive facts about the source, because this has been his experience with likeable persons in the past. This means that negative facts about the source might be screened or distorted in the perceptual process.

The Role of the Journalist

The predictions outlined above seem plausible in an experimental setting, but some doubts might be raised when dealing with journalists. The reporter presumably enacts a role in which many readers and editors expect him to be objective. Perhaps this role and its norms dampen the effects of psychological pressures that might influence the behavior of persons in other situations.

For this reason, half of the subjects in the study were told to write editorials and the other half were told to write news stories. It was assumed that the norm of objectivity would be more salient for those writing news stories than for those writing editorials, because editorials permit the journalist to express opinion.

Hypotheses

1. News stories and editorials written by reporters who have a positive attitude toward the source are more favorable to him than news stories and editorials written by reporters who have a negative attitude toward the source.

2. News stories and editorials written by reporters who expect to meet with the source in the future are more favorable to him than news stories and editorials written by reporters who do not expect to meet with the source in the future.

3. Editorials are more favorable to the source than news stories when the writer likes the source and are less favorable than news stories when the reporter does not like the source.

4. The messages most favorable to the source are editorials written by reporters who like the source and expect to meet with him in the future, while the messages least favorable to the source are editorials written by reporters who dislike the source and do not expect to meet with him in the future.

5. The reporter fails to perceive information that is inconsistent with his attitude toward the source.

Method

Seventy-one male and female undergraduate students at Indiana University served as subjects. All were enrolled in four sections of the journalism department's basic writing and reporting course.

Each section was assigned randomly to a condition for the attitude factor. Within each class, students were assigned randomly to the other conditions. One subject was dropped because he entered class late, after the experiment had begun.

Design

In a 2x2x2 independent-measure experimental design, (A) the reporter's attitude toward the source (positive or

negative) was varied with (B) the reporter's expectation of future interaction with the source (meet or not meet) and (C) the type of article written by the reporter (news or editorial).

Procedure

The experiment was designed to resemble a typical class exercise in the journalism department's basic writing and reporting course. When students entered the classroom, they were given assignment sheets that explained the procedure. The sheets said that a press conference had been held the night before that the instructor had wanted them to cover. Because it was called on such short notice, however, this would have been impossible. Therefore, the instruction sheet said, the instructor had the press conference videotaped so the class could see it and write about it. Subjects also were told that when the source had given permission for the videotaping of the conference, he requested that he be permitted to see copies of the stories written about him. It was necessary to tell the subjects this in order to simulate publication of their stories. In the real world, the source probably would read what a reporter had written about him.

In the instruction sheet, some subjects were told they would meet the source again, later in the week, to write followup stories. Others were not told this. Also, some were instructed to write editorials and others to write news stories.

After reading their assignments, the subjects read a background sheet that contained some information about the news source. Unobtrusively included in the sheet, along with such data as his age and address, was a description of him as either warm and friendly, or cold and hostile.

Subjects read the background sheet, then were shown a videotape of a press conference in which the student, who gave his name as Duane Cole, announced that he had been appointed student ombudsman for the Indiana University campus, and answered questions from reporters.

The questions, asked by confederates, were formulated to elicit favorable and unfavorable points about the source. For example, favorable points were good recommendations from students and faculty and the fact that Cole had counseling experience. Unfavorable pieces of information included the fact that the ombudsman would have little time for his new job, had been away from campus for four years, and had been on academic probation.

Immediately after the videotape ended, the subjects wrote stories or editorials. When finished, the instructor handed each a sheet containing an attitude scale designed to measure like or dislike of the source. The sheet also provided space for listing favorable and unfavorable points about the source.

Independent Variables

All three independent variables were manipulated with written instructions given subjects in the form of assignment sheets. The sheets explained the task, gave background information about the source, and outlined each subject's specific assignment.

Manipulation of the reporter's attitude toward the source was accomplished by describing the source as warm and friendly in one condition and cold and hostile in the other. The manipulation, similar to one used by Kelly, was pretested by having students read the background sheet about the news source that was used in the study.[10] Then they answered some questions and rated the source for likeability. Those in the cold condition found the source significantly less likeable than those in the warm condition ($p < .005$, one-tailed t-test)

Expectation of a future meeting with the source and the type of article written by the reporter were manipulated by instructions given each subject on his assignment sheet.

Dependent Variables

The main dependent variable used in this study was the favorableness of stories toward the source. A modified version of Janis and Fadner's coefficient of imbalance was used to content analyze the stories. The coefficient may be used with communication that can be divided into four categories: favorable, neutral, unfavorable, and irrelevant. In effect,

it presents a summary measure, ranging from +1 to -1, of the favorableness of a message toward an attitude object.[11]

Coders were instructed to search the news stories and editorials for any assertions about the news source, using Osgood's standard definition of an assertion.[12] The assertions were categorized using the paragraph as the context unit.

An assertion was classified as favorable if it implied that the news source was qualified or suited for the job to which he had been appointed, that giving the job to him had been a good decision, or that he would perform well in his new job.

Any assertion that indicated the source was not qualified for the job, would not perform well at that post, or hinted the choice of him had been a poor one, was coded unfavorable.

Assertions about the source that did not fall into one of the two categories listed above were classified as neutral.

The dependent variable was pretested to determine whether the coefficient of imbalance descriminated between favorable and unfavorable messages. Eighteen students enrolled in a reporting course were given transcripts of the videotaped press conference. Half were told to write stories biased in favor of the source, and the other half were instructed to write unfavorable stories about the source. Each was asked to write a short paragraph outlining the strategy he used.

All of the students reported that they biased their stories through the selection of favorable and unfavorable information. The difference between the mean coefficient of imbalance scores for the two groups was significant ($p < .01$, one-tailed t-test), suggesting that the coefficient could discriminate between favorable and unfavorable stories.

For the second dependent variable, the source evaluation inventory, subjects were asked to produce a list of favorable and unfavorable facts about the news source.

The third dependent variable, source likeability, was measured with a seven point like-dislike scale.

Results

Analysis of variance of subjects' responses to the attitude scale for likeability of the source showed that the manipulation of their attitudes by means of the warm-cold description was successful. (See table 1.) There was no significant difference, however, in attitudes held by those who expected to meet the source in the future and those who did not. This is contrary to the results of the Darley and Berscheid experiment cited earlier.[13]

There also was evidence indicating successful manipulation of the other two independent variables. After the

experiment, instructors were deluged with questions by students who wanted to know when they would have their future meetings with the source. Also, news stories and editorials differed significantly in favorableness toward the source.

In the analysis of variance for story coefficients, the absence of main effects for the A and B factors goes against the hypotheses that attitude and expectation of future interaction bias stories written by reporters.[14] (See Table 2.)

As mentioned above, factor C, the news-editorial condition, produced a significant main effect. Editorials were less positive than news stories. The mean coefficient of imbalance score for editorials was about .000, while the figure for news stories was +.156. This resulted because facts about the source were more balanced in the editorials than in the news stories.

The predicted interaction between reporters' attitudes toward the source and the type of story written (AxC) was not supported by the data. It was expected that editorials would be less favorable than news stories when reporters' attitudes toward the source were negative and more favorable than news stories when the reporters' attitudes were positive.

The data yielded an unexpected result, a significant interaction between the expectation of future interaction and the type of story written (BxC). (See Figure 1.) The Newman-Keuls procedure for testing differences among means with unequal cell sizes produced no significant differences. However, it appears that reporters who expected to meet the news source in the future wrote stories less favorable toward him than subjects who did not expect to meet him, regardless of the type of story written. Editorial writers who expected to interact with the source were even less favorable than news writers.

The fourth hypothesis -- that editorials written by reporters with a favorable attitude toward the source and who expect to meet him in the future will be most favorable toward the source, and editorials written by reporters with a negative attitude toward the source and who do not expect to meet the source will be least favorable -- was not supported. There was no significant interaction for all three independent variables (AxBxC).

Analysis of variance performed on coefficient of imbalance scores for the source-evaluation inventories produced no significant differences. (See Table 3.) This indicates a screening process was not involved in the subjects' perception of facts about the news source. Had screening been a factor, those with favorable attitudes toward the source should have

produced significantly more favorable items on the inventory than those with unfavorable attitudes. Thus, there should have been a significant difference on the A factor.

Discussion

The most important finding is the evidence that attitudes of reporters toward the source seemed to have little impact on news stories or editorials. This is in line with the results of the Kerrick, Anderson, and Swales study mentioned earlier.[15]

Two factors may account for this. First, the attitude toward the source resulting from the laboratory manipulations may not have been salient enough to affect stories written by the subjects. The Kerrick, Anderson, and Swales findings argue against this, because they found that "real world" attitudes reporters held toward labor or management did not affect newswriting.[16]

Another possible explanation is that the norm of objectivity for the reportorial role was salient in this situation and may have overshadowed the attitudes of student reporters toward their source. The journalists may have been conscious of their biases toward the source and made a great effort to be objective.

Support for this explanation is found in the Kerrick, Anderson, and Swales study. As discussed earlier, when reporters were asked to write from a fact sheet biased in line with their own attitudes, the writers slanted stories toward the opposite side. In other words, a pro-management writer who wrote from a fact sheet favoring management produced a news story biased in favor of labor. It appears that reporters overcompensated in an effort to be objective.[17]

The tendency of subjects who expected a future meeting with the source to be more critical of him in their stories than those who did not expect to meet him also may be related to the journalistic role. A need to defend one's journalistic integrity may be salient when one is to meet a source who will read the story written about him. This can be accomplished by writing a story that contains both good and bad points about the source. The reporter might feel that this would show the source that the journalist is not afraid to criticize him. It also might indicate that the journalist is objective.

The data also provide evidence indicating selective perception is not a particularly strong restraint on reportorial activity. For the most part, subjects were in possession of both negative and positive facts when they wrote their stories and editorials. Evaluative distortion of good and bad points about the source did not seem to be a factor either. There appeared to be high agreement among subjects about which facts were favorable or unfavorable.

Despite the failure of attitudes to have much of an effect on writing, news stories were not objective. They were slightly biased in favor of the source. There seemed to be a general reluctance on the part of the reporters to include negative items of information about the source. It was expected that an objective story would include both favorable and unfavorable statements about him. This would have given the stories a coefficient of imbalance score of near zero. In actuality, the news stories tended to be positive, while the editorials were more balanced, or objective, then the news stories.

Perhaps the reluctance of reporters to say negative things about a source when writing news stories during this study was the result of socialization. Individuals may hesitate to criticize others in public. Many children undoubtedly have been instructed by their parents, "If you can't say something nice about someone, don't say anything at all." This reluctance probably would disappear in situations when a person is expected to be critical, such as editorial writing.

Or, perhaps the bias results from the subject's perception of credibility. He may think that audience members will reject as unbelievable messages loaded with negative information but will accept messages containing only favorable statements.

One final but important point should be made. This study manipulated variables in a journalistic setting and found them to have little effect on behavior. Yet, related

research indicates these same variables have been effective determinantes of behavior in different settings. This raises the possibility that a reporter -- familiar with the journalistic role and its norms -- is affected less by some psychological variables than someone occupying a different role. In other words, the reporter may develop "journalistic defenses," through socialization into his role, that reduce the probability of his engaging in a multitude of subjective sins.

On the other hand, the bias of positivity that surfaced in the handling of facts about the news source presents a serious barrier to objectivity. Reporters should be willing to report the bad along with the good.

FOOTNOTES

1 Mitchell V. Charnley, Reporting, (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1959), p. 26.

2 For a more complete discussion of journalistic objectivity, see, Donald McDonald, "Is Objectivity Possible," Center Magazine, 5:29-42, 1971.

3 Fritz Heider, The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations, (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1968), pp. 200-203. Because of limited space it is not possible to include a thorough analysis of balance theory. Cognitive biases other than balance provide a better explanation for the results of some balance experiments. A more complete treatment is included in: Dan G. Drew, Attitude Toward a News Source, Expected Reporter-Source Interaction and Journalistic Objectivity, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Indiana University, 1973.

4 Jean S. Kerrick, Thomas E. Anderson, and Luita B. Swales, "Balance and the Writer's Attitude in News Stories and Editorials," Journalism Quarterly, 41:203-15 (Spring 1964).

5 Ibid.

6 Bradley S. Greenberg and Percy H. Tannenbaum, "Communicator Performance under Cognitive Stress," Journalism Quarterly, 30:169-78 (Spring 1962)

7 Heider, Ibid. p. 202.

8 John M. Darley and Ellen Berscheid, "Increased Liking as a Result of the Anticipation of Personal Contact," Human Relations, 20:29-40 (February 1967).

9 Jerome S. Bruner, "On Perceptual Readiness," Psychological Review, 64:123-52 (March 1957).

10 Harold Kelley, "The Warm-Cold Variable in First Impressions of Persons," Journal of Personality, 18:431-439 (June 1950).

11 Irving L. Janis and Raymond Fadner, "The Coefficient of Imbalance," in Harold Lasswell, Nathan Leites and Associates, (eds.) Language of Politics, (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1965) pp. 153-69. The researcher modified the method by coding only content relevant to the attitude object, in this case the news source. This was done because nearly all of the content was about the source and the coders had difficulty agreeing on irrelevant assertions.

12 Charles E. Osgood, Sol Saporta, and Jum C. Nunnally, "Evaluative Assertion Analysis," Litera, 3:47-102 (1956).

13 Darley and Berscheid, op. cit.

14 Before statistical tests were applied to the coefficient of imbalance scores for stories written by subjects, intercoder reliability scores were obtained. A reliability score of .76 was calculated for a random sample of stories using Scott's π, a formula that takes chance agreement into consideration. See W.S. Scott, "Reliability of Content Analyses: The Case of Nominal Scale Coding," Public Opinion Quarterly, 19:321-25 (Fall 1955).

15 Kerrick, Anderson and Swales, Op. cit.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

TABLE 1

Analysis of Variance for
Likeability Scores

Source	df	MS	F
Warm-cold (A)	1	.683	4.39*
Future Interaction (B)	1	.296	n.s.
Type of Story (C)	1	.012	n.s.
AxB	1	.007	n.s.
AxC	1	.285	n.s.
BxC	1	.177	n.s.
AxBxC	1	.000	n.s.

* $p < .05$

TABLE 2

Analysis of Variance for
Story Coefficients

Source	df	MS	F
Warm-cold (A)	1	.006	n.s.
Future Interaction (B)	1	.010	n.s.
Type of Story (C)	1.	.041	9.26**
AxB	1	.000	n.s.
AxC	1	.002	n.s.
BxC	1	.018	3.98*
AxBxC	1	.001	n.s.

*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$

TABLE 3

Analysis of Variance for Source Evaluation Inventories

Source	df	MS	F
Warm-cold (A)	1	.073	n.s.
Future Interaction (B)	1	.016	n.s.
Type of Story (C)	1	.050	n.s.
AxB	1	.001	n.s.
AxC	1	.009	n.s.
BxC	1	.021	n.s.
AxBxC	1	.038	n.s.

FIGURE 1

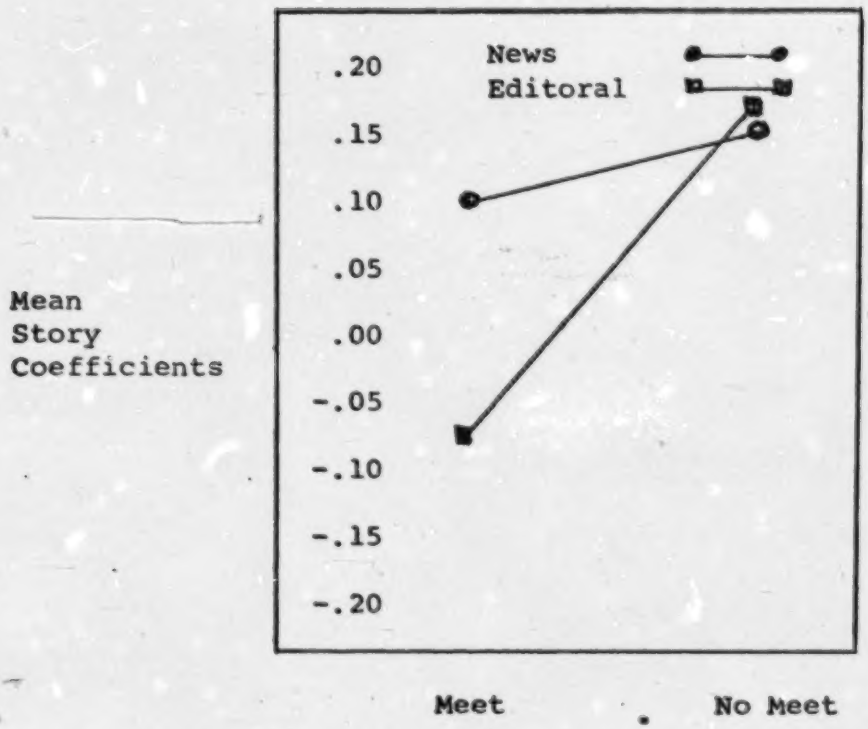

Figure 1. Story Coefficients as a Function of Expectation of Future Interaction and the Type of Story Written